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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CARACAS 000025

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SUBJECT: CHAVEZ NAMES JORGE RODRIGUEZ VP AND PEDRO CARRENO
AS INTERIOR AND JUSTICE MINISTER

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Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR ROBERT DOWNES,
REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D)

¶1. (C) Summary. President Hugo Chavez named former National Electoral Council (CNE) President Jorge Rodriguez to replace Jose Vicente Rangel as Vice President and Fifth Republic Movement (MVR) National Assembly deputy Pedro Carreno to replace Jessie Chacon as Interior and Justice Minister on January 3. Both Rodriguez and Carreno are Chavez loyalists and strident, hard-line leaders within the MVR. Chavez also said he would keep Rafael Ramirez on as his Energy and Petroleum Minister and suggested Chacon would be tapped for another, as yet unspecified, ministry. Rene Arreaza, Chief of Staff in the VP's office and one of the Embassy's most useful government contacts, is not likely to stay on. Chavez is expected to name a number of other new ministers in the run-up to his January 10 inauguration. End Summary.

Jorge Rodriguez - New VP

¶2. (SBU) President Chavez called a live pro-government talk show January 3 to announce the first of a series of cabinet changes that he plans to make in the run-up to his January 10 inauguration. Chavez tapped Jorge Rodriguez, the Minister of the Secretariat of the Presidency and former President of the National Electoral Council (CNE), to replace Jose Vicente Rangel as Vice President. Chavez cited unspecified "circumstances" that "obligated" him to make the change. Chavez also praised Rangel as a "star pitcher" and said he respects the outgoing VP like a "son does his father." He did not announce whether Rangel will be named to any other government position.

¶3. (C) Rangel's ouster from the cabinet was not unexpected. Rene Arreaza, Rangel's Chief of Staff, told the Ambassador December 15 that Chavez' entire cabinet had submitted their resignations after the Chavez' re-election on December 3 and that Chavez planned to accept Rangel's resignation. Arreaza has been one of the embassy's most approachable and useful BRV interlocutors, but he is not likely to stay on as Chief of Staff after Rangel's departure. Chavez may have publicly signaled the first post-re-election cabinet change when he blasted Rangel and Interior and Justice Minister Jessie Chacon at a televised December 17 ceremony after event organizers did not play the Panamanian national anthem on cue.

¶4. (C) Incoming VP Jorge Rodriguez is infamous for his staunchly pro-government bias during his tenure on the CNE from August 23, 2003 to February 2006, including as CNE President his last year there. International election observers highlighted the lack of public confidence in the CNE after the December 2005 parliamentary elections and recommended its "renewal." The National Assembly subsequently elected a new CNE board, although the CNE is still stacked 4-1 against the opposition. Rodriguez has had a considerably lower profile since being named to the new post of Minister of the Secretariat of the Presidency in February 24, 2006. He has close ties to outgoing VP Rangel, according to a number of embassy contacts.

¶5. (SBU) Rodriguez is a psychiatrist. Prior to entering government, he was a professor of psychiatry post-graduate studies at Caracas University Hospital in the Venezuelan Central University and at the Community Psychiatric Hospital in the Andres Bello Catholic University. He, along with Caracas Municipal Mayor Juan Barreto and Anzoategui Governor Tarek William Saab, is a former member and leader of the "Movimiento 80," a student political group that pressed for democratization at the Venezuelan Central University. An avid reader, Rodriguez used to write a literary column in the Caracas daily "Tal Cual." Rodriguez' father was the head of the Socialist League before his assassination in the 1970's (allegedly by police personnel). The 41-year old Chavez loyalist is married and has three children.

Pedro Carreno - New Interior and Justice Minister

¶6. (C) Chavez also announced January 3 that National Assembly deputy Pedro Carreno will replace Jessie Chacon as Minister of Interior and Justice. Carreno is a former Army Captain who was cashiered from the armed forces in 1994 for his participation in Chavez' failed 1992 coup. He is a Fifth

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Republic Movement (MVR) deputy from Chavez' native state of Barinas and vied unsuccessfully for the National Assembly Presidency in January 2006. Chavez instead named him head of the National Assembly Commission that oversees government spending. He was Second Vice President of the National Assembly from 2004 to 2006.

¶7. (C) Carreno has been both a leader of the hard-line Chavista wing of the MVR and a loose cannon in the legislature. In January 2002, Carreno demanded an investigation into an alleged U.S. government plot to overthrow the Chavez government based on documents that were immediately exposed as a crude forgery. He also accused DirecTV, a satellite dish cable company, of espionage. Prior to being elected to the National Assembly in 2000, Carreno was the Director General for Presidential Relations at the Miraflores Presidential Palace from 1998 to 2000. He worked as an assistant to Chavez during the 1998 presidential campaign.

¶8. (SBU) Carreno graduated from the Military Academy in 1985. He subsequently studied history at the Venezuelan Central University and Andres Bello Catholic University, as well as marketing at Florida International University. He has traveled widely in Latin America and Europe as a National Assembly deputy. Carreno was born April 24, 1961 in the western state of Apure.

¶9. (SBU) Chavez did not cite any specific reasons for replacing outgoing Interior and Justice Minister Chacon, but did make reference to general security problems, including a recent prison riot (septel). Chavez suggested that he would appoint Chacon to another ministry, but did not specify which one. The replacement of Chacon is not a surprise either, as he was widely considered to be vulnerable given Venezuela's significant crime problems. Chavez not only registered his

displeasure with Chacon at the December 17 ceremony commemorating the anniversary of Simon Bolivar's death, but also admonished him during one of his weekly "Alo Presidente" television programs in August 2006.

Comment

¶10. (C) Chavez' first post-re-election appointments suggest that he intends to construct a cabinet that is "red, really red" (as coined by the staying on Energy Minister Rafael Ramirez) and unquestionably loyal to the president. Rangel served Chavez faithfully as Foreign Minister, Defense Minister, and Vice President, but he also had his own political stature that predated the rise of Chavez. Rodriguez and Carreno owe all their political stature to Chavez, and they are much more likely to echo and amplify Chavez' policies than they are to try to temper or shape Chavez' own ideas. Moreover, both are as -- if not more -- ideologically in sync with Chavez' anti-Americanism as their predecessors.

WHITAKER